

In Conversation with Louise Grenier

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Indigenous knowledge is the unique information and knowledge system that indigenous people use to survive. Many researchers now use it as the starting point for developing sustainable development programs.

Louise Grenier is the author of *Working with Indigenous Knowledge*. This guidebook focuses on how indigenous knowledge can contribute to a local sustainable development strategy. It contributes to improved design, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation of research programs on indigenous people's territories.

In a recent conversation with Reports Ms. Grenier touched on the following points:

How well accepted is indigenous knowledge world-wide?

It really depends on where you are in the world. For instance, I think in Canada the topic is quite advanced because of all the indigenous land claim settlements. During the land claim process many aboriginal people stipulated that indigenous knowledge had to be used during the decision-making process. So in Canada, and probably in the US, it is well on its way to being palatable to the general public. In other places in the world, it doesn't have that status because it is a very touchy and politically sensitive issue because indigenous knowledge is so closely linked to land rights.

Your book is specifically a guide to the professional working with indigenous knowledge. How advanced are researchers?

It depends on the type of researcher and institution. An NGO doing research can be quite advanced. They can be working with it. Starting with what local people already know and putting it into the decision-making process. Within more academic research, you have a real continuum with some researchers completely neglecting the topic while others are really trying to work with it.

In your book, while you talk about specific techniques, at its core is the appeal for a specific researcher attitude that combines respect, reciprocity and relationship.

It is an idea I borrowed from Ian Whelan of Cultural Survival Canada. Those three R's capture an attitude which is very comprehensive. For ages, local or indigenous knowledge or traditional knowledge has been maligned. It has been degraded or it has been considered useless knowledge or non-knowledge. Respect is looking at knowledge without discounting it just because it doesn't fit into your current theoretical model. Also accepting the fact that someone's else's understanding is valid, or perhaps is more valid than your preconceived notions.

Indigenous knowledge research is a two-way street. The researcher can't really expect to go into local communities and just take. If a person is going to do research, something has to be given back. The community has to gain from the research process. Why would someone want to waste their time because local people's time is valuable.

Moreover, before people give their knowledge, you usually have to build some friendship. And until that friendship or relationship is built, people may not give you correct knowledge, or accurate knowledge or the real piece of information that is critical to your understanding and a development process.

How do you balance the respect for indigenous knowledge and still be critical?

You receive the information with respect but it is still a balancing act. I think a researcher cannot lose his or her critical mind. It is a very hard line to call. Some data can be difficult to evaluate. Some of the data could be wrong.

For example, I was working in Botswana and I remember an old woman who came by my house. She wanted to borrow some gasoline from my motorcycle. She wanted to put it on a wound. I don't know where that knowledge came from but that could be a practise which is wrong.

And there is the whole issue that some knowledge may no longer be appropriate. I am thinking about shifting cultivation. It was probably a good system a little while ago when the population density wasn't so high. Now shifting cultivation is more difficult to be seen in a favourable light. Now you are not able to rotate your fields as much. So this indigenous knowledge leads to error. It used to be correct but under current conditions it fails.

Does Indigenous knowledge research borrow from a number of different approaches?

Indigenous knowledge research borrows from many fields because it is relatively new. For example, the indigenous knowledge of women is very different from [that of] indigenous men. When you are doing research, the problem is not usually capturing men's knowledge. The problem is usually capturing women's knowledge. So indigenous research borrows from gender research.

Moreover, minorities never get their knowledge captured so you do participatory research so you can get the less advantaged people to contribute to the knowledge set.

There are a number of international conventions that deal with Intellectual Property Rights. Do any of these documents address indigenous knowledge?

Not explicitly. There is nothing to dig your teeth into yet. Although those conventions begin to address Intellectual Property Rights and begin to address the knowledge that local communities have, there is no mechanism.

Nevertheless, there are some mechanisms that can be used by the researcher and the community. They include contracts and memorandums of understanding and licensing. It is the responsibility of the researcher to not infringe on intellectual property rights.

The most important issue is community participation. Ensuring the community knows what the research is about and what could be the output at a later date. For example, seeds and the access to seeds. If a researcher goes into a community and starts looking at rice varieties, that researcher, if she is guarding intellectual property rights, must recognize community ownership.

The researcher will not take those seeds and run off with them and put a patent on them. But at this point, it is still only a moral responsibility.

Who is this book for?

This book is designed for the seasoned professional, project managers, research coordinators or extensionists looking for new insight into indigenous knowledge and the student who needs an informative source book.

Louise Grenier, B.Sc., has worked in international development, environmental and indigenous issues since 1986. Ms Grenier has delivered workshops in Hanoi on intellectual property rights and research methodologies for the collection, assessment and application of indigenous knowledge. Her experience has extended to Canada's North with the Nunavut Impact Review Board Transition Team advising on the integration of traditional knowledge into the environmental assessment process. She has also worked and lived in Botswana and Indonesia. In Jakarta, Ms. Grenier was Environmental Advisor and Field Manager for the Centre for Research on Human Resources and Environment at the University of Indonesia.

The Book

- [Working with Indigenous Knowledge: A Guide for Researchers](#)
by Louise Grenier, IDRC 1998